

Baseball's Dumbest Cliche

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Baseball is a game of, among other things, cliches. It is impossible to watch a ballgame on television, listen to one on the radio or even talk baseball with most fans for long before a player is described as "running pretty well for a catcher," or reporting to spring training in "the best shape of his career." Every championship team is described as having "good chemistry," and middle infielders who stick around for a long time for no apparent reason are still occasionally described as "scrappy."

One of the strangest and most annoying cliches to have worked its way into the baseball vernacular is the one that is a variation on the idea that the Yankees have to win the World Series every year or the season is a failure. This phrase seems to worm its way into almost every article on the Yankees. This [otherwise standard pre-season article](#) on Yankee second baseman Robinson Cano in the *New York Times* this week where writer Scott Cacciola describes the Yankees as being a team "for whom anything less than a World Series trophy is a symbol of failure," is a recent example of this.

The basic problem with this cliche, like many cliches, is that it has no meaning. On one level, it states the obvious, that the Yankees would like to win the World Series every year. This, however, is true of most teams. Moreover, while the Yankees remain the most successful team in baseball history, winning the World Series every year, or even most years is simply not a realistic goal. The team has won one World Series in the last decade and even going back to its most successful recent period, has won only five of the last 17 championships. This is, of course, an extraordinary run of success, unless the platitude of winning every year is taken seriously. This cliche also suggests that other teams either only occasionally set out to win, or that when they do win, it is do to some kind of coincidence. However, in recent years teams like the St. Louis Cardinals, San Francisco Giants and even the Boston Red Sox have managed more championships than the Yankees. Fans and management of those teams would probably not agree that those were the result of luck or anything of that nature.

It is also not clear for whom around the Yankees a season that does not end in a World Series victory is a failure. Does the ownership genuinely believe that a season in which they make millions in profits and continue to build the value and brand of one of the most valuable sports franchises on the planet is a failure-disappointment perhaps, but not a failure. Do the players feel this way? It is hard to imagine that Robinson Cano, for example, looks at a year where he made millions of dollars working at a job he loves, during which he continued to establish himself as one of the very best at his profession as a failure. Obviously, Cano, and his teammates are frustrated by the ignominious defeat to the Detroit Tigers in the ALCS, but that does not mean they see the entire season as a failure. Even Derek Jeter, who is the player most closely associated with the Yankees and their real or imagined winning ways, probably does not look at a season where he performed better than most expected while continuing to climb the all time hit list and build on a resume that is already good enough to all but guarantee selection to the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility, probably does not see the season as a failure. Jeter, like all

Yankee fans, was undoubtedly unhappy to see his season end prematurely due to injury in the playoffs, but that is different from failure.

The one significant group of people for whom a season that does not end with a World Series victory might be seen as a failure is fans of the Yankees. This would be unfortunate because that means that Yankee fans who spend a season watching YES most nights, listening to ballgames on the radio as they go about their summer activities, making it to the Stadium a handful of times, and talking baseball with their friends and family, in other words doing many of the things that make being a baseball fan fun, see that as a failure and a waste most years. A fan base that is told to expect a World Series victory every year, and to see anything else as a failure is going to end up an angry disgruntled group, largely because they have been sold a bill of goods by the team's management.

This cliché is not only meaningless, but it becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy which hurts the Yankees more than it helps them. The Yankees have backed themselves into a position where they can never go into a trading deadline as a seller, never walk away from a winter without a free agent signing and rarely go with a high upside young player to fill a hole. The result, as it has been for 11 of the last 12 years, is not meeting their goals and having a payroll that is bloated with old and declining players. The Yankees are learning the hard way that trying to win every year can mean not winning in any years.